

# PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

Edited by WILFRID SELLARS and HERBERT FEIGL with the advice and  
assistance of PAUL MEEHL, JOHN HOSPERS, MAY BRODBECK

VOLUME XVI      Contents January–February 1965      NUMBER 1-2

*On Being Moral* by Kai Nielsen, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

*Does Negation Rest upon a Mistake?* by Alan Ross Anderson, YALE UNIVERSITY

*Metaphorical Assertions* by Robert Brown, AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

*Mr. Hare and the Conscientious Nazi* by Alan Donagan, INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Note on "A Paradox in Frege's Semantics" by Robert Sternfeld, STATE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK (STONY BROOK)

*The Tortoise Shoots Back* by Norwood Russell Hanson, YALE UNIVERSITY

*Another Look at Bare Particulars* by Edwin B. Allaire,  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

*D-Words, A-Words, and G-Words* by H. J. McCloskey, UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

---

## *On Being Moral*

by KAI NIELSEN

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

IN SOME contexts we clearly know how we ought to act, but we may wonder what reasons (if any) can be given for doing what we acknowledge we are morally speaking required to do. Hospers has entered the lists of those who have tried to show that such a question is a spurious one.<sup>1</sup> The man who

tries to ask it merely exhibits his own failure to understand exactly what it is that he is trying to ask. I shall argue that Hospers' claim is mistaken.

People may have many things in mind when they try to raise this "question," but what both Hospers and I have in mind is this: what reason is there for an individual, living in an ongoing moral community, to do what he honestly regards as the right thing to do. If everyone or even a considerable number of people failed to take the moral point of view, then life would indeed become intolerable. But if I am not a public figure and if I am a reasonably discreet and rational individual, living in a society committed to the moral point of view, my behaving in a nonmoral way will not cause social chaos or in any way make community life intolerable. Thus, to prove that society—that is, the people who make up society—has a legitimate interest in morality will not show why I, as an individual in such a society, should be moral. Surely I must seem to be a good fellow, but what reason is there for me to be a morally good man? Why in such a situation should I not allow my self-interest to override the moral demand that the interests of everyone involved have an equal claim to be taken into consideration? Why should I be moral? (The 'should' here cannot, of course, have a moral force.<sup>2</sup>)

We feel that here something surely has gone wrong. Where there should be an unequivocal answer, we seem to be completely at a loss to give a non-question-begging answer. But this, Hospers argues, is not due to any deep "existential surd" but is simply due to the fact that anyone who tries to ask the "question" we have been trying to ask is the victim of a conceptual confusion. Such a person is in effect asking for a self-interested reason for doing what is not in his self-interest. But this is like asking for a yellow banana that is not yellow. As Hospers puts it: "Of course it is impossible to give him a reason in accordance with his interest for acting contrary to his interest. That would be a contradiction in terms. It is a self-contradictory request, and yet people sometimes make it and are disappointed when it can't be fulfilled. The sceptic shows us an example in which he would be behaving contrary to his interest and asks us to give him a reason why he should behave thus, and yet the only reasons he will accept are reasons of self-interest."<sup>3</sup> An "answer" to such a "question" would need to claim that there is a self-interested reason for doing what is not in one's self-interest and this is surely a contradiction.

Hospers' argument does indeed clearly show that, if we are reasoning morally, 'It's the right thing to do' or 'It's the morally best thing to do' is the final sort of justification we can give for acting in one way rather than another. In such a situation there is no justifying what is right. We simply should do it because it is right. Sometimes what is right and what is in our

rational self-interest coincide and sometimes they do not, but one can never, from the moral point of view, justify acting in a way that is not in accord with the general welfare by proving that it is in one's self-interest. It is a truism that morally speaking we should always do what is right, but it is also a truism that from a self-interested point of view an individual should always do what is in his self-interest. From the moral point of view, *moral* reasons are by *definition* decisive, but from the point of view of self-interest, self-interested reasons are by *definition* decisive. Moral considerations count even from that vantage point, but there they can never override considerations of enlightened self-interest.

We can now ask the sixty-four-dollar question: what would it be like to show that one point of view rather than another was the more rational or the best for a free, intelligent, and thoroughly nonevasive individual? It looks as if there could be no non-question-begging answer one way or another here. From the moral point of view moral reasons are superior; from a self-interested point of view self-interested reasons are superior. Yet these two alternative points of view present themselves to an individual. They are there before him and in the situation Hospers describes he must simply choose between two alternative ways of acting—ways of acting that can have very different consequences. Looking at the matter strictly from an individual's point of view, where there are no self-interested reasons for doing what is right, it is logically impossible that there could be any non-question-begging grounds for adopting one alternative rather than another. Hospers' analysis in effect clearly brings out why this is so. In such a context, a person faced with such alternatives must just make a decision concerning how he will act and how he wishes to live.

While there are, or at the very least may be, specific situations in which we can find no objective reason for acting as a moral agent rather than as a man who is looking out for number one and only number one, we must take care not to draw the mistaken conclusion that this shows that there can be no reasons of an objective sort for adopting, as an *over-all* life policy, the moral point of view, as distinct from a purely egoistic point of view. It is one thing to say that there are some *situations* in which doing what is right will not bring one happiness and will not serve one's rational self-interest, but it is another thing again to claim that a man who made egoism the maxim of *all* his actions would be happy or would, by consistently acting on this maxim, in reality serve his own self-interest. That this would be so is very questionable indeed. (Here we have something that is very like the paradox of hedonism.<sup>4</sup>)

It is indeed a mistake to assert that being immoral always leads in the long run to misery; it is also a mistake to deny that immoral behavior some-

times leads to greater happiness. But such a recognition does nothing to show that the man who has consistently and thoroughly reasoned according to purely egoistic principles would not be unhappy. It is only in our tribal folklore that *all* acts of immorality lead to regret and misery. Occasional immoral acts are quite compatible with a happy life for the immoralist but a thorough and consistent pattern of wrongdoing will, as the world goes, make for him and for those about him his own little hell.

Received September 2, 1963

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Hospers, *Human Conduct* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), pp. 174–95.

<sup>2</sup> Kai Nielsen, "Is 'Why Should I Be Moral?' an Absurdity?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 36:25–32 (1958).

<sup>3</sup> Hospers, *Human Conduct*, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 136.

## *Does Negation Rest upon a Mistake?*

by ALAN ROSS ANDERSON

YALE UNIVERSITY

PHILOSOPHERS differ enormously as to just what they wish to include under "formal logic."<sup>1</sup> Some wish to include the whole of mathematics, others only a positive second-order functional calculus, others only classical positive first-order logic with (of course) modal operators. And there are even narrower criteria for positive logic set by the intuitionists.

But to employ an underlying logic with *negation* for the purposes of philosophical analysis is obviously suspect. To be sure, in the sentential calculus, addition of "negation" produces interesting mathematical structures; no one would want to deny that Boolean algebras have interesting mathematical properties. But philosophers who use systems of logic with negation are not interested primarily in the resulting mathematical structures. They must also provide a satisfactory *interpretation* of the calculus. Needless to say, it is not quite clear what we ought to mean by "satisfactory," but roughly speaking we may say that an interpretation is satisfactory if it is clear, clean, and simple. In the case of a modal operator like necessity ("N"), for example, we may render "Np" into a satisfactory metalanguage (English, say—a metalanguage that many of us use) as "Necessarily, p," and